
Introduction to Competency-Based Education



WHAT IS COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION?

There are many types of competency-based education (CBE) programs, and there is currently no Federal definition for these educational methods. However, in general, a CBE program is one that organizes content according to what a student knows and can do, often referred to as a “competency.” CBE programs also generally have very clear claims for student learning, stress what students can do with the knowledge and skills they acquire, and have assessments that provide measurable evidence of competency. Student progress is determined by mastery of each competency. Because CBE focuses on whether students have mastered these competencies, there is a focus on learning outcomes rather than time spent in a classroom.

The Department encourages innovation in this experiment. It intends to take an expansive view in considering whether a program constitutes CBE and to minimize existing limitations on how programs must be provided to the extent possible.

HOW DO I KNOW IF MY PROGRAM IS A COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION PROGRAM?

The Department relies in part on institutions and accrediting agencies to determine whether a program constitutes CBE. Therefore, in order for an institution to participate in this experiment, one or more of its programs must be approved, recognized, or designated as a CBE program by the institution’s accrediting agency. More information about this process is provided in Section 2.

CAN COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION PROGRAMS BE OFFERED USING CREDIT OR CLOCK HOURS?

Yes, CBE may be offered using credit hours or clock hours. A program that is organized by competency, but measures student progress using clock or credit hours, is a CBE program, but not a direct assessment program. A CBE program offered using credit or clock hours is subject to Federal requirements for the definitions of credit hours and clock hours.

The definition of a credit hour in the regulations at [34 CFR 600.2](#) includes a provision that allows an institution to establish credit hours in a CBE program that are based on an amount of expected educational activity that reasonably approximates not less than one hour of classroom instruction and two hours of out of class work each week. An institution’s policies for establishing credit hours in its CBE programs for Title IV purposes must be consistent with these requirements. An institution’s policies for establishing credit hours for a CBE program must meet all requirements and standards set by the institution’s accrediting agency.

The regulations at [34 CFR 600.2](#) define a clock hour. A clock hour is a period of time consisting of:

- ▶ A 50- to 60-minute class, lecture, or recitation in a 60-minute period;
- ▶ A 50- to 60-minute faculty-supervised laboratory, shop training, or internship in a 60-minute period; or
- ▶ Sixty minutes of preparation in a correspondence course.

A CBE program that measures progress in clock hours must meet this definition.

WHAT IS DIRECT ASSESSMENT?

Unlike CBE programs offered in credit or clock hours, there is a specific Federal definition for direct assessment programs. A direct assessment program is an instructional program that, in lieu of credit hours or clock hours as measures of student learning, utilizes direct assessment of student learning, or recognizes the direct assessment of student learning by others. The assessment must be consistent with the accreditation of the institution or program utilizing the results of the assessment.

Direct assessment of student learning means a measure by the institution of what a student knows and can do in terms of the body of knowledge making up the educational program. These measures provide evidence that a student has mastered a specific subject, content area, or skill or that the student demonstrates a specific quality such as creativity, analysis or synthesis associated with the subject matter of the program. Examples of direct measures include projects, papers, examinations, presentations, performances, and portfolios.

Student progress is measured solely using direct assessment. Therefore, unlike a CBE program measured in credit or clock hours, a direct assessment program does not specify the level of educational activity in which a student is expected to engage in order to complete the program. However, because a direct assessment program does not utilize credit or clock hours as a measure of student learning, an institution must establish a methodology to reasonably equate the direct assessment program (or the direct assessment portion of any program, as applicable) to credit or clock hours for the purpose of complying with applicable regulatory requirements.

Note that even though student progress in a direct assessment program is measured without credit or clock hours, an institution may still provide credit or clock hour equivalents on a student's transcript in order to facilitate the transfer of credit to other institutions. In such a case, institutional policies, publications and consumer information must be clear in specifying that the program is a direct assessment program rather than a clock or credit hour program.

Before an institution may provide Title IV aid to students in a direct assessment program, that program must be approved under the regulatory provisions at 34 CFR 668.10. More information about this process is provided in Section 2.



References and Resources

Federal Register

July 31, 2014 Federal Register

ESI Website

<http://ExperimentalSites.ed.gov>

- CBE Action Plan

Dear Colleague Letters

Dear Colleague Letter - [GEN-14-23 Competency-Based Education Programs - Q & A](#)

Dear Colleague Letter - [GEN-13-10 Applying for Title IV Eligibility for Direct Assessment \(Competency-Based\) Program](#)

